

A Call for Parental Involvement in State Schools

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Abstract

Parental involvement (PI) in the education of children is an important element of effective education (Hornby, 2017). The setting of School Councils regulated by LEGAL NOTICE 135/1993 is one way to encourage PI in State Schools in Malta. However, the role of School Councils is fluid and participation is not promising. This paper provides an overview of the current PI based on Hornby's (2000) models from the perspective of the author's experience originating from her involvement with School Councils since 2008 and her role as president of the Maltese Association of Parents of State School students (MAPSSS) since 2012. The call for parental involvement comes from policy makers and the parents themselves, but, in practice, there are various gaps and barriers that hinder parental participation in the schooling of their children. The changes in the social dynamics challenge the traditional role of parental involvement schools which teachers are bound to. The teachers' and parents' understanding of parental involvement may not be congruent, creating a sense of suspicion that conditions the possibility for collaboration. Moreover, the changing context of the education system and the demands on teachers sidelines further parental involvement. To translate the call for parental involvement in practice, the necessary support through training and guidance to all parties and the required structure should be embedded in the system, so as to allow a gradual paradigm shift.

Keywords: *Parental involvement, School Councils, State Schools, MAPSSS.*

Introduction

Extensive research indicates that Parental Involvement¹ (PI) is an important element in formal education and it is advantageous for all children of any age-group (Epstein, 2001; Cox, 2005; Hornby, 2011). Apart from facilitating academic achievements, PI improves the students' attitude, behaviour, mental health and attendance. This in turn contributes to an overall improved school climate and teacher morale (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). PI may vary from supervision of homework to attending parent-teacher meetings or education workshops. Hornby (2000) created a framework

1 Parental Involvement refers also to students/children's legal guardians and caregivers

that elaborates hierarchies of PI varying from communication, liaison, education, support, information, collaboration, resource and policy.

International research over the past decades reinforces the importance of PI to support an effective education (Epstein, 2001; Cox, 2005; Hornby, 2011). However, this contrasts with the reality in schools, where worldwide PI is marginal (Epstein, 1990). This article is an appraisal of PI in State Schools within the Maltese context. The reflections in this article are based primarily on my involvement in the Maltese Association of Parents of State School Students - MAPSSS² since 2012 both as a founding member and as president. It also draws from my experience as a ministerial appointee as president of School Councils since 2008. My insight on parental involvement, particularly in State Schools (which is the largest sector in Malta) comes from two vantage points both as an educator involved in teachers' training and as a parent of children attending both primary and secondary schools. This article employs, as its primary methodology, participant observation that also draws from participation in various conferences, from focus group discussions organised by various entities and from working groups and committees set by the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE).

The Call for Parental Involvement

The call for parental involvement in State Schools in Malta has been supported by a legal framework since 1993 through the Subsidiary Legislation 327.43, entitled School Council Regulations, which was amended in 2007 by Legal Notice 424. All State Schools are administered by a School Council composed of the President, who is appointed by the Minister, the Head of School in the role of the Secretary/Treasurer, 3 educators and 3 parents. Elections are held every 2 years to appoint educators among the school staff and parents among those of the students attending that particular school. The most recent elections were held in January 2019, showing an overall increase in parents' participation compared to the 2017 elections but which still marking a low turnout in nominees among parents, given that the elections were only held in 28 schools (MEDE, 2019).

The legal notice provides guidelines on the operation of the Council, including the role of the President, the Secretary/Treasurer and the Council activity, which is divided into sections: Administration of Funds and Assets, Contact with Parents, The Council and Local Organization, The Council and the School Staff, The Council and the Running of the School, The Council and the School Environment. Although the document includes operation guidelines that state what the Council may or may not do in specific circumstances, it does not state the responsibility of the Council

² <http://mapsss.org/>

in principle.³ This creates ambiguity as the Council's remit is not clear, particularly when it comes to aspects related to the curriculum and to the drawing of policies. Yet, since the section regarding the Administration of Funds and Assets and the School Environment are straightforward, the role of the School Council has been minimised to fundraising activities and maintenance assistance with the help of parents in many schools. This follows the general roles taken by parents in education as helpers and fundraisers even in other countries (Hornby, 2000). Unfortunately, a number of parents perceive that the role of parents in School Councils is limited to fund-raising activities. Some parents would like to contribute more on the educational aspect rather than fund raising activities and hence end up shying away from School Councils, missing the possibility to contribute more as governors. The legal framework for School Councils is there to support the idea of parents as governors of the school, but the reality may be different. This is where the praxis regarding parental involvement in education in state schools lies.

Beyond the legal framework regulating School Council, there are various initiatives that encourage parental involvement within the education system. This includes the recent organisation of accredited modules for parents and guardians by the Institute of Education (MEDE). The Faculty of Education at the University of Malta addresses parental involvement with prospective teachers through seminars and tutorials. During 2018-2019 alone, there were a number of conferences, seminars and workshops that addressed, directly or indirectly, parental involvement in our education system. These include a workshop to Ensure Quality Early Childhood Education organised jointly by the Faculty of Social Wellbeing and the Faculty of Education, a seminar entitled The Child in Early Childhood Education organised by Lisa Marie Foundation, a seminar to discuss Guidelines on Social Media organised by the Directorate for Education Services (MEDE) and a seminar regarding the international tests PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS organised by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT). Moreover, parents are represented even in the National Curriculum Framework Board, the Council for the Teaching Profession and the Foundation for Tomorrow Schools. MAPSSS committee members have been invited to attend various workshop and consultation meetings, varying from the introduction of the tablet in primary schools, discussions regarding the school transport system and early school leaving and changes to the Benchmark Examinations. The call for parental involvement in the education system is consistent, yet the remarks on social media and the actual figures of parents participating in School Council elections suggest otherwise.

Various questions arise from this scenario: what is conditioning parental involvement in schools? Is this a matter of logistics due to work commitments, of power-relationships with the teachers, or disinterest in their own children's education, as it is sometimes interpreted by educators? There is no one simple answer to such complex situations and interpretations.

3 Changes to the legal framework regarding School Council may be included in the imminent publication of the upcoming Education Act.

Parental Involvement in Formal Education – A Rhetoric of the Call

Hornby (2000) identifies 6 models of PI in schools, as summarised in Table 1, which have different sets of assumptions, goals and strategies that either try to minimise parental involvement or promote it actively:

Models For Parental Involvement	
Protection Model	PI is limited to taking the children to school on time and providing them with the necessary resources. PI is considered unnecessary and potentially damaging to an efficient education
Expert Model	Teachers are considered the experts in the development and education of children whereas parents are there to receive information and instructions about their children. Parents end up submissive to teachers who overlook information that may be provided by parents
Transmission Model	Teachers consider themselves as the experts with children but recognise that parents can be a useful resource to whom they can transmit their expertise to follow up their intervention with the children. The teacher is in control and decides on the intervention, yet it is more likely that the parents' concerns are addressed.
Curriculum Enrichment Model	Parents are considered important experts who collaborate with teachers to implement the curriculum as they learn from each other.
Consumer Model	Teachers are considered consultants by providing information and range of options for the parents to consider and who decide the course of action
Partnership Model	Teacher are considered experts on education whereas parents are considered experts on the children. The relationship between teachers and parents is considered a partnership based on mutual respect which involve sharing of expertise and control

Table 1: Models for Parental Involvement adapted from Hornby (2000)

Generally, during a scholastic year calendar, parents of children attending primary State Schools in Malta are usually invited to school on very few occasions. In the beginning of the scholastic year they hear about the school policy and meet the teachers. Towards the end of the first term they have a short meeting with the teacher of about 5 minutes during Parents' Evening. In December they are invited to the Christmas concert and maybe to some open-class activities. Parents' days are organised in the second term where parents have a 10-minute briefing about the child's progress with the teacher. The School's Senior Management Teams (SMT) are usually also present, to discuss any issues raised by parents. Parents may also be invited to school for information meetings held by PSCD (Personal Social Career Development) teachers or Education Officers of specific subjects to discuss specific

themes such as the use of the Digital Tablet, how to study Maths or how to improve the literacy of the child. Occasionally, schools organise other talks for parents on themes like cyber bullying or drug abuse. Throughout the scholastic year, teachers communicate with parents through a notebook, and if the need arises, both the parents and teachers may fix an appointment to meet.

In the secondary cycle of education, parents are invited for a Parents' Evening in the first term and a Parents' Day in the second term, where parents queue up to talk to the subject teachers. Communication with the SMT or the teachers during the rest of the year is either through notes, emails or phone calls to the central office at school or by setting an appointment with the people concerned. The school may update parents through emails/circulars. Some primary and secondary schools use social media to circulate notices or share photos of the schools' activities. In case of a major reform in the system, such as the introduction of continuous assessments or vocational and applied subject through the My Journey programme, meetings for parents are College based organised by the Directorate for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability (MEDE).

Moreover, the level of parents' participation in schools and the role parents take in School Council is very fluid. In most schools, parents (mainly mothers) help in the fundraising activities. Occasionally, Council parent members embark in projects, such as helping out and upgrading the school library. The direction and focus of the School Council is generally given by the Head of School or the President of the School Council. Occasionally, although not specified in the legal notice, Heads of school invite Council parents' representatives to participate in the School Development Plan.

The majority of PI in State Schools follow the Expert Model and the Transmission Model, even if the Partnership Model is being promoted. The importance of parental involvement in the education system of the Maltese Islands has been stressed and encouraged in various occasions and in different fora. As stated by Minister Bartolo (2014), parental involvement should not be limited to sending information to parents but through actual family engagement through discussion. The setting of an association for parents of state school students (MAPSSS) was encouraged by both the former government administration in 2012 and supported by the current Ministry for Education and Employment since 2013, as policy makers could feel that parental involvement is lacking within the Maltese education system. MAPSSS as an association tries to fill the lacuna of PI on a policy level. Since its establishment MAPSSS Committee has regular meetings and communication with senior officials at the Ministry for Education and Employment regarding policies varying from the curriculum, to daily matters. MAPSSS seeks to maintain an open dialogue with MUT (Malta Union of Teachers) and UPE (Union of Professional Educators) as teachers' representatives.

The rhetoric of parental involvement may be attributed to various factors. Hornby (2000) identifies various factors that determine the extent of PI in schools that may

also be identified within the Maltese context. One of the barriers to PI is what Hornby (2000) refers to as 'demographic changes' but which are strictly speaking 'social changes', considering that this is related to the increasing involvement of mothers in the work force and single mother households that results in a decreased involvement in school matters (Hornby & R. Lafaele, 2011). However, the decrease in the involvement in school matters as a result of the 'demographic-social' shift cannot be equated simply to a decrease in the parents' interest in the education of their children, as it is sometimes implied by educators. Rather, this is attributed to the change in the lifestyle of the household, which does not fit the traditional model of how parents are involved in school matters. For example, legal notice 327.43 of 2007 regarding School Council states that this should meet at least once a month, but meetings are generally held in the morning, which clashes with parents' work commitments. The custom to hold the meetings during school hours is deterring the participation of parents who do not have flexible working hours in School Councils. When both parents work, there will be less time available for both home-based and school-based PI, even to follow the children with their homework (Catsambis, 2001; Green et al., 2007). This situation is incongruent with the teacher's expectations from parents and undermines the idea of parents as partners in the education of students. It reinforces further some of the teachers' deficit model of parents who, as stated by Hornby (2000), are often considered 'problematic', 'vulnerable' and 'less able'. Bastiani (1993) comments that a partnership is at odds when there is no mutual respect, negotiations and shared purposes. Parent-school partnership is often determined by the school's agenda of how parents should engage with the school. Bastiani (1993) and Rudny (2005) point out that the objectives of parents and teachers regarding PI may be different; teachers tend to focus on the academic dimension whereas parents consider also the child's sense of belonging and progress with the rest of the children amongst others. One cannot ignore that parents' approach to the schools is often conditioned by their own school experience. It cannot be dismissed that some parents decide to check their conversation with teachers and SMT, as they are conditioned by the power-relationship in this 'partnership' with schools since teachers have their children in their care. On the other hand, the teachers' experience with parents determine their attitude to PI. Violent incidents, as the one which occurred in February 2019 in a secondary school, where 2 adults, a parent and an uncle, hurt a student and an educator, definitely contribute to a sense of suspicion and cautionary attitude from behalf of the school staff. MAPSSS as an association does not discuss these specific incidents, but tries to strengthen the home school link by providing feedback to policy makers in the attempt to create fora for better communication between schools and homes.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency among many teachers to generalise about parents, as if a bad experience with one parent that may have not respected their boundaries with educators is reflecting the attitude of all the parents. As Bastiani (1993) points out, parents speak with different voices and are certainly

not a homogeneous group. On the other hand, even the perception of the parents towards teachers may be conditioned by their past school experience. Difference in perceptions and assumptions of parents and teachers widen the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of PI. However, Hornby (2000) explains that the experience of parents depends also on the school culture. Schools that are welcoming to parents develop a more effective PI. Epstein (2001) states that parents are more involved when they perceive that they are welcomed by teachers who have a positive and facilitating attitude. The attitude of parents and teachers weave their approach towards PI and determine the atmosphere and actions regarding PI. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) suggested that approach, attitude, atmosphere and action are four key elements for enhancing PI. However, in my role as an educator and as a parent involved in MAPSSS, I observed that the prevailing sentiment among both teachers and parents towards each other is a sense of 'suspicion'. This is attributed to various factors, including the teachers' working environment that encompasses several reforms in the education system at large. These put further demands on educators, apart from increasing a sense of accountability for the students' achievements. On the other hand, one cannot ignore that, as explained by Hornby and R. Lafaele (2011), as a result of the neo liberal market driven economy, parents' attitudes changed to recognise their rights for PI. This context highlights that PI in education is a complex matter that goes beyond simplistic notions and the issues that arise are related to how to implement effective PI in a context where generalisations and 'othering' prevail.

Conclusion

I have come to believe that a key factor that contributes for a collaborative working relationship between teachers and parents as a means of providing quality education to students is the development of interpersonal skills that might facilitate communication leading to an eventual ironing out of perceptions and misinformation that hinder a positive approach, attitude and atmosphere to enhance effective PI. The onus remains mainly on the teacher as the professional. However, notwithstanding the cry for PI, the future of effective parental participation in the education of their children is not promising. The complexity of the context is acknowledged. The way forward is frail. Teachers' training programmes side-line parental involvement. This is not different from other countries (Epstein, 1985) and it reflects the professional expectations from parents as key stakeholders in an education system. Moreover, as Hornby (2000) explains, effective PI involve increasing teachers' time. This may not be easily available for teachers as a result of the ongoing reforms and the associated reform fatigue teachers lament about due to their ongoing struggle with time management. Furthermore, effective PI would require additional financial and human resources (Hornby, 2000) that may not be easily attained due to the shortage

of teachers of certain subjects rather than others. This context does not promise any shift in approach to PI. In view of this scenario, expecting teachers to add on effective schemes of parental involvement to their professional commitment without the necessary support and structures may actually backfire, to the detriment of the education experience of generations of students.

In order to translate the call for parental involvement from policy to practice, there needs to be a gradual paradigm shift in the general approach towards parents as valued contributors to the education of the younger generation. The call for parental involvement should be supported by training and guidance to all parties and by providing various possibilities that would allow space for teachers and parents to meet and talk to clear away the air of suspicion. The efforts and creativity of a number of teachers who try to engage meaningfully with parents notwithstanding the circumstances they operate in may be the kindle that warms the atmosphere for more effective parental involvement in schools.

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Bio-note

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